



From the very opening line when 15 year old Penny Nichols flings open the door to her father's detective agency, it's easy to see that this young girl is going to be a head-strong young sleuth determined to solve whatever mystery may fall her way.

Written by Mildred Wirt (who helped make Nancy Drew such a success when first introduced back in 1930) under the pen name of "Joan Clark," this series of four books published in the mid-1930's follows the same premise as our favorite teen sleuth. With blue eyes and curly golden hair, Penelope Nichols ("Penny" to all who know her) is the apple of her father's eye. Her father, Christopher Nichols, is a private detective and a widower, whose wife, Penny's mother, died when Penny was very young. They have a housekeeper, Mrs. Gallup, who manages the home and has basically adopted a motherly-instinct for young Penny. Mr. Nichols indulges his only daughter a great deal, and encourages her to spend time with her young friend, Susan

Altman. Susan is admittedly plump with brown hair. She is the same age as Penny, but she is much more reluctant to go off adventuring than Penny.

While there are definitely a number of similarities between Penny Nichols and Nancy Drew, there are also some distinct differences. While the Nichols do seem to be well-off, Penny drives a second-hand automobile that is constantly having problems. In fact, she's been driving it for three years (which would mean she started driving at the tender age of 12!). She is given much freedom by her father, as is Nancy Drew, but Penny's father is more cautious, and in times of trouble, has some of his employees secretly trail her to rescue her when she gets into trouble or other tight spots. Penny is also more quick to jump to conclusions and apt to act without thinking, which in some instances, creates more difficulty in solving the mystery!

The books do carry some repeating themes - photographs of key people play an important part in the first two mysteries, leading Penny to piece together the puzzle and solve the mystery based upon photographs she finds; and in the second two mysteries, Penny finds herself having to climb out on window ledges to go from one room to the next! However, these certainly do not take away from the non-stop action and fun-to-read mysteries that Mildred Wirt has created in this short series.

**PENNY NICHOLS FINDS A CLUE** is Penny's first big adventure as a sleuth. When she inadvertently befriends a young boy who is running from the police, she finds the he is connected to a ring of car thieves that have been stealing tires and other car parts throughout Belton City! Penny's father is hired by the insurance company to find these thieves, and while he knows who is behind it, he can never seem to catch them in the act. Penny stumbles across several more clues along the way, including a secret entrance opened by a light sensor and the real identity of the boy she befriended, and in a dead of night chase out of town, Penny finds herself at the mercy of hardened criminals who will do anything to keep her from contacting her father and the police!



**PENNY NICHOLS AND THE MYSTERY OF THE LOST KEY** finds Penny once again coming to the aid of a stranger. When a thief steals an expensive diamond ring from the department store where Penny is shopping, Penny is hot on his trail. She loses him, however, when she stops to assist a young girl who is shoved aside during his attempt to escape. The young girl turns out to be Rosanna Winters, an orphan who is trying unsuccessfully to make her way on her own. Penny learns that Rosanna has received a letter from an attorney in a nearby city advising her of an inheritance from an uncle she barely knew and providing her with a key to the estate! Penny goes to the Raven Ridge estate with her new friend and stumbles upon a dangerous scam involving the heirs to the estate of Jacob Winters – a social-climbing cousin, a suspicious nephew, and an ornery neighbor all lead

Penny to uncovering not only who is really entitled to the estate, but what really happened to Jacob Winters!

**PENNY NICHOLS AND THE BLACK IMP** once again sees Penny coming to the aid of a fellow youngster who is wrongfully accused of a crime she didn't commit. When an expensive Rembrandt painting is stolen from the local art gallery where a competition for a prize statuary is taking place, Penny quickly comes to the defense of a young sculptor who is accused of the theft – simply because she left the gallery early when her Black Imp figurine does not win! Adventure after daring adventure ensues as Penny uncovers a group of thieves who not only swindle rich art lovers out of their money, but who ultimately kidnap poor Penny and leave her in a burning building to face her fate! And just what secret does that little Black Imp hold?

**PENNY NICHOLS AND THE KNOB HILL MYSTERY** is Penny's last foray into the realm of mystery-solving. This time, she and her father rent a cottage up on Knob Hill for a relaxing vacation, only to discover that not only is their landlord a gruff old man, but he's keeping his grandson locked up at home and harboring mysterious secrets regarding his nephew who has come to town and disappeared! When another mysterious man shows up, and the woman the Nichols' have hired to be their housekeeper during their stay begins to exhibit secretive mannerisms, Penny finds herself once again neck-high in adventure – this time finding a thief and uncovering their landlord's missing nephew!

No fifth mystery ever saw the light of day (although some people have commented that perhaps "Connie Carl at Rainbow Ranch" was originally intended to be the fifth mystery, possibly because it was written under the same pseudonym of Joan Clark). All those fans of Mildred who enjoyed the Nancy Drew, Penny Parker, and Kay Tracey tales that she wrote, should get a good read from this series!

*\*\*SIDENOTE: At the end of Lost Key, before the phrase "The End" is a notation of two typed letters – "M.W." For whatever reason, these letters were added onto the end of the last sentence. Could they possibly refer to the true author – Mildred Wirt?*